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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002402

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND: AMBASSADOR,S MEETING WITH THE OPPOSITION  
PUEA THAI PARTY

REF: A. BANGKOK 2386 RED-SHIRTS PREPARE TO MARCH

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 2385 STRENGTH OF DEMOCRACY

[1](#)C. BANGKOK 2289 POLITICAL ROUNDUP

[1](#)D. BANGKOK 2125 POLICE CHIEF BATTLE

[1](#)E. BANGKOK 1491 BELWETHER BY-ELECTION

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR ERIC G. JOHN, REASON: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) On September 18, the Ambassador met with Yongyuth Wichait, the leader of the opposition Puea Thai Party, to sound him out on a number of issues of importance to the opposition. Former Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama joined the meeting as well. Yongyuth expressed confidence in Puea Thai's prospects in the next election, stressing that no one could say with any certainty when they might take place, however. Noppadon joined Yongyuth in assailing PM Abhisit's overall performance, with Yongyuth asserting that nothing better illustrated Abhisit's impotence than his inability to appoint his own police chief (REFS C-D).

[1](#)2. (C) On the subject of fugitive former PM Thaksin's ongoing efforts to chart a safe course back to Thailand, Yongyuth suggested a Puea Thai election campaign could feature amnesty for Thaksin as a part of its platform. Otherwise, a path could open up in the highly unlikely event of an outbreak of violence (Note: As reported in REF A, he repeatedly -- and accurately -- forecast the September 19 protest would be peaceful. End Note.) Both Yongyuth and Noppadon joined the Ambassador in lamenting the deleterious effects of corruption; they claimed that between twenty and thirty percent of all government expenditures were lost to kickbacks and other crooked inefficiencies. They claimed the worst offender was Phumjai Thai, which would try to use its Ministry of Interior foothold to help its prospects in the next election.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment: Both Yongyuth and Noppadon came across as relaxed and confident. While they clearly suspect the government, particularly Phumjai Thai, will try to stack the electoral deck against them, they nevertheless seem to

believe they will do well in the next election. We were struck by the fact that there was no sense of urgency in the air; we doubt there is any grand strategy in place to push for immediate elections beyond periodic demonstrations to help make the case the government isn't up to the task. For now, it seems clear that Thaksin's cronies in Puea Thai are content to bide their time and sit back and watch Abhisit navigate political and economic minefields. End Summary and Comment.

#### ELECTION TIMING: HARD TO SAY

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¶4. (C) During a September 18 meeting with Yongyuth and Noppadon at Puea Thai party headquarters, the Ambassador inquired about possible election timing, noting that most people believed Puea Thai would do well if elections were called in the near future. Both Yongyuth and Noppadon said that while Puea Thai was ready for immediate elections, they did not feel comfortable guessing when they might take place. At one point, Noppadon suggested that the PM would try to delay elections until the end of 2010, but allowed that Puea Thai would be content with a timeline of "six months or so."

¶5. (C) Yongyuth was even less willing to go out on a limb, turning to the Ambassador at one point to ask him "what U.S. intelligence services were saying about election timing." The Ambassador agreed that it was very difficult to predict with any certainty, adding that those who professed to know the answer were either poorly informed or simply not telling the truth. Yongyuth agreed, adding that the next elections would be "like a tsunami" in the sense that no one knew when they would take place, but that they would certainly take place with little advanced warning.

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¶6. (C) When the Ambassador asked what might trigger the next round of elections, Yongyuth asserted that it would be a combination of public and private pressure coupled with poor performance on the part of the government. Yongyuth colorfully explained that PM Abhisit was effectively "sitting on a grill" right now. While he might not feel the heat at present, the heat would continue to build to the point that he would eventually have to get off the proverbial grill and call for elections. According to Yongyuth, the important thing was that the next elections unfold peacefully and that the next administration be elected democratically.

#### ABHISIT'S STRUGGLES AND POLICE CHIEF

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¶7. (C) Turning to the Prime Minister's performance, both Yongyuth and Noppadon were scathing in their criticism. According to Yongyuth, Abhisit had not displayed any leadership on economic or social issues, or in the political realm. Yongyuth told the Ambassador that the average Thai was worse off than before he came into office, and he pointed to Abhisit's inability to appoint a Police Chief as the perfect illustration of his lack of leadership (REFS C and D).

¶8. (C) When the Ambassador asked Yongyuth for his assessment of the Police Chief standoff, Yongyuth told him that as reported in REF C, it was shaping up as a contest between Abhisit's candidate -- Police General Prateep Tunprasert -- backed by Queen Sikrit on one side, with Police General Jumpol Manmai on the other side backed by the Crown Prince.

#### PUEA THAI PROSPECTS

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¶9. (C) On the subject of the party's electoral prospects, Yongyuth asserted that Puea Thai would do well in the next round of elections. Responding to a question from the

Ambassador about polling, Yongyuth said that the party's own internal polling revealed that the Puea Thai was in excellent shape in its traditional strongholds in the North and Northeast. Furthermore, Thaksin was outpolling Abhisit by a nearly two to one margin in popularity according to their internal polls. Besides, Puea Thai's dominating performance in recent by-elections showed the continuing appeal of the party (REF E).

¶10. (C) Above and beyond Puea Thai's own formidable party machinery and ongoing appeal, Yongyuth claimed much of his confidence derived from the Prime Minister's poor job governing the country. As long as Abhisit continued to mismanage the economy and falter politically, Puea Thai had nothing to be worried about and would be well positioned for the next elections. When the Ambassador observed that conventional wisdom held that Abhisit and the Democrats would try to hold onto power as long as possible in order to develop a strong governing record and distribute stimulus funds, Yongyuth argued such a strategy would fail. According to Yongyuth, the budget was enormously inefficient, and Thai voters would see the extent of the corruption problem in the Abhisit administration and vote accordingly.

#### A PATH BACK FOR THAKSIN

¶11. (C) Turning to Puea Thai's de facto leader and financier, the Ambassador asked about the state of relations between the party and former PM Thaksin. Yongyuth told the Ambassador that relations were good, and added that Thaksin maintained a constant dialogue with the party on matters both large and small. Thaksin remained a formidable political presence within Thailand, and Puea Thai was mindful of this.

¶12. (C) When the Ambassador inquired about possible roadmaps for Thaksin's return to Thailand, Yongyuth said there were at

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least two ways for this to happen that he could think of. In the first scenario, Puea Thai could decide to make amnesty for Thaksin a major part of its platform in the next round of elections. If Puea Thai was then elected back into power, the party would somehow make good on its campaign promise and clear the legal and political path for Thaksin's return. The second would involve an outbreak of violence in some form, a possibility he characterized as highly unlikely. In such a scenario, circumstances on the ground in Thailand could change to the point that he would have an opportunity to return and play a role in getting the country back on track.

#### THAILAND'S CHALLENGES

¶13. (C) Turning to Thailand's ongoing challenges, Noppadon argued that political and economic instability was the biggest impediment to Thailand's development. Noppadon said the 2006 coup knocked Thailand off course and claimed that red-shirt loyalists felt a lingering sense of injustice that would take some time to dissipate. The dissolution of Puea Thai's two political predecessors, Thai Rak Thai and the People's Power Party, were the two most egregious examples of an uneven playing field. Given the recent treatment of Thaksin affiliated parties, Noppadon said he would not be surprised if the Puea Thai party were disbanded in the event of victory as well.

¶14. (C) On the subject of corruption, Yongyuth alleged that 20 to 30 percent of all government funding allocated for the provinces and projects was lost to corruption and kickbacks. Though he admitted that this was a problem that transcended governments, Yongyuth argued the problem was becoming even more pronounced with the current government, a direct result of Phumjai Thai's rapaciousness.

#### PHUMJAI THAI

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¶15. (C) Asked whether Puea Thai could make common cause with Phumjai Thai ever again, Noppadon said he didn't think so. Yongyuth agreed, noting that Newin Chidchob had demonstrated throughout his career that he was driven only by greed. Newin lacked character and sincerity and would align himself with whomever he thought would give him the best deal. Currently his party was well positioned in the government; by playing the role of Kingmaker, he had the ultimate leverage. According to Yongyuth, Newin would try to milk it for all it was worth.

¶16. (C) Yongyuth noted that one of his primary concerns about Phumjai Thai was that they would try to use the Interior Ministry to improve their election chances, particularly in the Northeast. Though Puea Thai's emphatic victories in recent Northeastern by-elections (REF E) had demonstrated the limits of this approach, one could expect Phumjai Thai would do everything possible to rig the next elections in its favor. When the Ambassador noted that a recent Asia Foundation survey revealed that half of all Thai believed the next election would not be free and fair (REF B), Noopadon said that he understood why respondents would feel that way as he did too.  
JOHN